

February 23, 2010

To Senator Edith Prague, Representative Kevin Ryan, Senator Edwin Gomes, Representative Tim O'Brien, and distinguished members of the Labor and Public Employees Committee:

I am writing as a psychologist with a specialty in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder to offer information about the diagnosis of PTSD that may bear upon upcoming decisions in Stamford Police Officer Frank Chiafari's appeal for benefits. I have worked in the field of PTSD for 22 years, was a senior staff psychologist at the Traumatic Stress Institute in South Windsor for 11 years, have served as a consulting psychologist for the Computer Crimes Unit of the State Police, am currently on the board of the Connecticut Alliance to Benefit Law Enforcement (CABLE), and have conducted psychotherapy with survivors of many types of traumas, including war, rape, child abuse, as well as dozens of law enforcement personnel who experienced traumatic situations on the job.

I understand that a central question in the deliberation over Officer Chiafari's diagnosis of PTSD is whether or not his having killed a chimpanzee, as opposed to a human, would qualify as a sufficiently traumatic event to justify the diagnosis. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-IV), in listing the diagnostic criteria for PTSD, considers a traumatic situation one in which the person has 'experienced, witnessed, or been confronted with an event or events that involve actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of oneself or others', AND that the person's response 'involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror'. What I have been told about Officer Chiafari's experience is that he was faced with a large, violent, unrestrained chimpanzee that had just torn the face off a neighbor woman, and was at one point trying to pull the doors off his police vehicle. I have not met with Officer Chiafari, and thus can't attest to whether or not his symptoms are consistent with DSM-IV criteria for PTSD, but I can say with confidence that this situation, as described to me, is indeed consistent with DSM-IV descriptions of traumatic events: there was a serious threat of death, serious injury, or threat to physical integrity to both Officer Chiafari and the victim(s) of the chimpanzee's violence. In addition, common sense tells me that this is a highly unusual/unanticipated situation of horrific violence that would likely be considered shocking by most people. Still, I would suggest that the ultimate question as to the veracity of the overall diagnosis is less about the particular details of the event itself, and moreso a question of whether or not Officer Chiafari shows the requisite symptoms of PTSD, as listed in DSM-IV. The DSM diagnostic scheme is constructed such that the diagnosis is made if the criterion symptoms are demonstrated.

I would like to suggest one more important consideration regarding the precipitating event itself. Experience has repeatedly shown me that what is traumatic for one person may not be for someone else, and that the degree to which a person becomes traumatized by any given experience is determined not only by the level of personal threat involved, but also by the individual's life history, personal characteristics, prior trauma, etc. Indeed DSM-IV notes the importance of these contributing factors. The point to heed, here, is that it is often unwise to judge the impact of an experience based simply upon the event itself, since most research points instead to the interaction between situation and person (history, vulnerabilities, etc) as determining psychological impact.

I hope that this information is useful in your deliberations.

Sincerely,

J. Mark Hall, Ph.D.
CT license # 001579